



# Program Iteration Works: The Case of the Economic Futures Workshop

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## THE ECONOMIC FUTURES WORKSHOP

Communities want to know the economic impact of adding or losing businesses in their community. Often these requests come as communities are determining local policies to recruit or retain a business, and the question is worded to get a number: “what is the multiplier of X”?

The Futures Workshop was created to empower community leaders with the understanding of what industries compose their economy and how the industries interact. This broader understanding enables community leaders to be proactive. The goals of the workshop are:

1. Build awareness of how industries differ in their impacts
2. Create a common language
3. Aid communities in using data to support decisions.

## TIPS FOR PROGRAM ITERATION

- 1) Start with the best program. Futures Workshop was generated based on conversations with communities
- 2) Expect that we missed something important — it takes humility
- 3) Seek out and incorporate feedback on program design, presentation, and data
- 4) Allow time to make changes & retry
- 5) Repeat steps 1-4.

## CONVERSATIONS WITH DATA: WHY PROGRAM ITERATION MATTERS

In our role as Extension, we are often called on to both 1) distribute valuable information and data and 2) lead a conversation about that data. However, conversations in which group members are asked to assess data and integrate it into critical thinking for decisions are difficult to facilitate. Program iteration is one method for finding the right balance. Our key learnings include:

1. **Set the stage, but let the group work through the data.** This moved the conversation from Extension as the expert towards an equal level of understanding of the data across participants
2. **The right questions matter.** By implementing ORID principles to craft questions for the group, the participants now move from their initial reactions to the point where they can recommend strategies and actions based on the data.
3. **Mix it up.** With thoughtful planning ahead, organizing the groups to reflect different types of expertise allows deeper conversations among participants.

## WHERE WE STARTED

- First workshop was over an hour of data presented by Extension.
- Participants were asked to respond as a large group.
- Discussion following presentation focused on initial reactions.
- After initial reactions, participants were immediately asked to suggest strategies for incorporating the data into decisions.
- Evaluation scores were low. Some participants were agitated during the presentation. “To what extent do you feel you can use the idea or skills you learned?” Average score of 3.2 in first workshop.

## WHERE WE ARE NOW

- Extension sets the context for the discussion with an overview of the economy. In the process, Extension is also explaining how to interpret the data.
- Participants are placed in small groups (4-5 people). Each group is given a set of data slides to discuss.
- Participants are given four questions designed to move to deeper thinking before being asked how the data can be used in decisions (see below).
- Evaluations scores are improved (to 5.3). Participants are engaged and energized by the process.
- Four communities are using the information to be proactive in crafting their economic development plans (Mille Lacs County, Pine County, City of Otsego, and Washington Counties)



## ORID DISCUSSION PROCESS: A FOCUSED CONVERSATION METHOD

ORID developed by R. Brian Stanfield; Stanfield, R.B. (2006). *The Art of Focused Conversation* (8th ed.). New Society Publishers.  
Pictograph designed by Rani Bhattacharyya

